

Book Review & Recommendation:

My Name is Chellis and I'm in Recovery From Western Civilization by Chellis Glendinning

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Abstract

I would like to recommend a terrific read that shifted my world to the core: My Name is Chellis and I'm In Recovery From Western Civilization, written by psychologist Chellis Glendinning.

Although this book was published in 1994, the content is ever more relevant in today's atmosphere. Glendinning posits that the root of our suffering and dysfunction as modern human beings is directly related to the severance of our elliptical cohesion with the natural planet, which is assumed to have originally occurred some 15,000 years ago with the beginnings of agriculture and domestication. The book is split into four parts, beginning with 'Roots,' which explores the relationship between human and planet as it was designed, and the benefits of that relationship to be mutually dependent. In the second part, 'Domestication and Its Discontents,' Glendinning describes when the severance of this relationship began to unfold. Part three, entitled 'Hunting, Gathering and Healing,' entails the possibility of personal recovery in the modern age for a hopeful outcome of a healing process for all humans as a community. For the last section, 'Re-Arising Within Us,' she reiterates that our primal blueprint still exists within all of us. As it is important to realize an awareness and psychological healing, the climatic endeavor would entail re-claiming our wild nature for the sake of "breathing fully in intimacy and rhythm within the Earth." (Glendinning, 1994, p. xiii.) It is simply not enough to experience the alignment of body, spirit and Earth through sporadic activities in workshops, activities, stargazing; our objective is to bridge the gap of wholeness by digging deep into the elements of the Primal Matrix.

In Part One, Glendinning introduces the concept of the 'Primal Matrix' consisting of three qualities, the first being 'a sense of belonging and security in the world, trust, and faith.' This element emphasizes the 'I-In-We' concept, which is illustrated by describing the passage through the birth canal as an initiation to this recurring theme in life. As well, it reinforces the

individual need for community and a support system to thrive. The second quality is ‘a sense of personal integrity, centeredness, and capability,’ considered to be the ‘consciousness of I.’ This dimension entails the importance of a healthy personal development for the success of the individual’s relationship with themselves as well as the community in which they participate. The third and final quality of the Primal Matrix is ‘the capacity to draw vision and meaning from non-ordinary states of consciousness,’ also described as the ‘We’ aspect. The author touches on non-ordinary states of consciousness quite a bit throughout the book, which reinforces the concept in the field of Ecopsychology: “self as world, world as self.” (Glendinning, 1994, p. 21). Humans and all other species depend on one another and the intricate ecology to survive and thrive; in turn, the Earth depends on the inhabitants to participate in reciprocity as designed. The author emphasizes that the Primal Matrix exists in nature-based people as a compass to navigate their existence. As modern humans, the Primal Matrix still resides within us all as well, although we are encased in a concrete jungle, nearly suffocated by the artificial, man-made systems we know as ‘civilization’. Consequently, all other species are unable to thrive and suffer under the byproduct of oppression as well.

Considering all modern humans are in a chronic state of suffering from the severance of our original design, we employ various coping mechanisms to fill that void. These mechanisms, although some may seem well-intentioned, are most prominently tied to superficiality, instant gratification and addiction. Addiction takes many forms, including consumer behavior (frivolous shopping), and substances (drugs, alcohol, sugar), as well as the trivial pursuits of perfectionism, prestige, and power, to name a few. Disorders such as narcissism and codependency fly rampant among the wounded. As we look to make sense of our existence, especially within the Western

world, we are painstakingly spinning our wheels. The key takeaway is that we must find the Primal Matrix within ourselves as a compass for healing.

In part two, the author outlines the speculation of how and when humans were led astray, or the “original trauma”. (Glendinning, 1994, p. 57). The great severance was initiated by the beginnings of agriculture, when the early humans began to experiment with domestication of plants, animals and essentially ‘putting up fences,’ so began the quantum phenomenon of alienation. Rather than continue to hunt, forage and live in communion with each other and the planet, the concept of agriculture severed the ‘We’ aspect of the Primal Matrix. There are a range of theories that attempt to explain how agriculture came about and whether it was necessary at the time for survival. Glendinning describes this turning point as the time in which the role of the woman was changed drastically, as well as the initial momentum for the population growth to run off the charts. When women were still responsible for foraging, they fulfilled an important role for their families; as well, they carried their young with them on their hip as they ‘worked.’ The combination of moderate activity and the bond with the child served as a natural birth-control for women, keeping them from reproducing constantly but instead spread throughout their child-bearing years. Once the manifestation of agriculture began, women retired their foraging roles, becoming sedentary and more fertile.

Fast-forward to the fifteenth century, in which the author profoundly describes the introduction of vantage point as a new way of life: “No longer were people finding themselves in the world as vibrant participants touching, feeling and breathing the richness of its storm clouds and stars; we were beginning to shield ourselves from the natural world, to become spectators of our own lives.” (Glendinning, 1994, p. 58). We officially became detached individuals. Once we arrived at the more recent Industrial Revolution, a perfect storm of dysfunction was in full swing.

In part three, Glendinning proposes how we may begin healing psychologically, both individually and collectively. She cites the traditional approach of Alcoholics Anonymous as a hallmark for recovery. Although rather grim, we must admit that we are “without hope... we are powerless before the civilization we inhabit, and we are powerless over the destiny of our lives within this civilization.” (Glendinning, 1994, p. 158). Once we realize we have “hit bottom,” (through no actual ‘fault’ of our own, per se), and that we are powerless to society at large, we are still responsible for our own healing and our further actions. To facilitate psychological healing, the author calls on us to break our barriers of denial and amnesia with a sharp concentration in order to examine our own traumatic experiences. It is important to consider that as she suggests, trauma is an injury to the psyche that is passed down over generations. Whether or not we are aware of it, we hold within ourselves the past trauma of all our ancestors. Indeed, a tall order, yet once we begin to unravel the pain in our stories may we begin to align our thoughts, feelings and spirit. Without a doubt, this is a life-long process but a rewarding one at that. On a collective level, we must begin to take down the ‘fences’ and reinstate a sense of community with one another.

The final section, ‘Re-Arising Within Us,’ Glendinning steps beyond the psychological healing aspect for an actual reclamation of our Primal Matrix. By no means are we expected to return to our pre-historic roots in entirety, yet the objective is to immerse in nature on a level that promotes a full engagement: climbing down from our bird’s eye view and throwing our notebooks and cameras aside for the sake of being fully present. Once we have a taste of this truly human experience we all deserve and owe ourselves to take part in, full-throttle, can we awaken to the possibilities of healing and re-evaluate our values to align exclusively for the preservation of this new relationship.

As I begin to only scratch the surface in making sense of this true predicament, I feel hyper-aware after reading Glendinning's incredibly dialed-in analysis of our state of being and the ecological crisis at hand. I am deeply inspired by her message and albeit a 'lost cause' in the scheme of things, I'm motivated to take opportunity in any potential for personal healing, as well as restorative activism among the current atmosphere dynamic.

References

Glendinning, C. (1994). *My Name is Chellis and I'm In Recovery From Western Civilization*.

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